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TWO QUESTIONS, THE SAME ANSWER: THE ROLE OF DEMAND IN PROSTITUTION AND SEX TRAFFICKING

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KEYWORDS

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SURVIVORS OF PROSTITUTION AND SEX TRAFFICKING are human beings. I want to ask two questions. The first is, “What is the role of demand in prostitution?” The second, “What is the role of demand in sex trafficking?” The same men who buy women in prostitution also buy women who are sexually trafficked; there is not a market for women in prostitution and a separate one for sex trafficking victims. So, the answer to these questions is this: the men who pay to purchase sex fuel the demand for both prostitution and sex trafficking. They fuel the trade in human beings who are bought and sold for sex. The fact that both questions have the same answer should tell us that there is a direct correlation between prostitution and sex trafficking. Many may argue that those who engage in prostitution do so out of choice, while those who are sexually trafficked are in prostitution through force, fraud, or coercion. While we are not here to debate today, we can all agree that engaging in the sex trade is a matter of survival, it is the exploitation of human beings, and demand for commercial sex is the driving factor that promotes the existence of prostitution and sex trafficking.

The demand for prostitution and sex trafficking can be conceptualized using the economic theory of supply and demand where human beings are at the center. We cannot continue to try and address the issue of demand by separating the core components into differentiating categories of adult and children, male and female, survivors of prostitution and survivors of sex trafficking. We must realize that the common commodities sold across all these categories are human beings whose lives are all impacted by physical and psychological abuse.

The scourge of prostitution and sex trafficking continues to exist in our communities for a number of reasons. To begin with, there is a disregard for the value of human life. As I travel across the world making presentations, I love to ask the audience, “What is one thing you value?” The responses are oftentimes “my family,” “job,” or “faith.” Rarely do people say, “Life.” This illustrates how easy it is for traffickers to capitalize on society’s collective disregard for human life, and seize the opportunity to use people as commodities.

Survivors of prostitution and sex trafficking are human beings.

There are 10 ways we can effectively address the role of demand in prostitution and sex trafficking (they are not presented in order of importance).

- We must begin to **change the mindset of our culture and understand the realities of those who engage in prostitution and who are sexually trafficked.** Intersectionality is at the core. The lack of economic opportunity, lack of education, poverty, race, class, gender, and inequality are among the reasons why people engage in prostitution and are trafficked. These issues must be addressed if we are to successfully combat demand.
- We must change the mindset of our culture to **become more sympathetic to those who are engaged in commercial sex and less sympathetic to the men who purchase sex.** The men who purchase sex get a slap on the wrist as their lives are considered to be more valuable than those who are engaging in commercial sex. He is the CEO, the senator, a family man, he has children. If anyone should find out he purchases sex it will impact his career and his family. Meanwhile, the prostituted or trafficked individual is seen as someone who is neurotic and not deserving of assistance.
- We must **understand that language matters.** The men who purchase sex should not be called names like “buyers” and “johns” which hide their misogynistic acts. Those terms normalize their behavior. We must begin to call them by their true names: “rapists,” “pedophiles,” “abusers,” and such, sending the message that their behavior is neither normal nor acceptable.
- **Enforce existing laws.** Many are pushing for stronger laws but the rule of law is simply not enough. There are laws already on the books that need to be enforced so that the men who purchase sex are deterred. Laws should be enforced without fear of losing a case. For this reason, I will always respect and honor Cynthia Cordes, the first federal prosecutor in the United States to use the Trafficking Victims Protection Act to prosecute the purchasers of sex trafficking victims in 2009. Of the seven buyers she prosecuted in one particular instance, six of them were sentenced to 10 – 15 years in prison.¹ She was not afraid to use the law and she was not afraid to lose. In fact, she would challenge the detectives to dig deeper into their cases so that victory was imminent for the prosecution.
- **Follow the recommendations of the reports and studies conducted on the subject of demand.** In a 2008 Chicago study, “Deconstructing the Demand for Prostitution,”² 113 men who purchased sex were interviewed. When asked what would deter them from purchasing sex, 87% reported that their name being listed in the local paper, 82% their photo and name published on the Internet, 79% a letter sent to their family reporting that they were arrested for soliciting or engaging in prostitution, 70% their car impounded, and 68% a fine larger than \$1,000. There are lessons to learn from each report and study conducted.
- **There should be a significant shift in the criminal justice response.** Oftentimes the words “victim-centered approach” are used by those in the criminal justice system. However, a victim-centered approach

¹ Shared Hope International, “Sex Trafficking Buyer Convictions in Missouri,” http://sharedhope.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Sex_Trafficking_Buyer_Convictions_in_Missouri.pdf (accessed March 18, 2017).

² Rachel Durchslag and Samir Goswami, “Deconstructing The Demand for Prostitution: Preliminary Insights From Interviews With Chicago Men Who Purchase Sex” (Chicago: Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation, 2008), p. 7, 24.

does not criminalize the victim but understands that the prostituted or trafficked individual is in need of services. Prostituted and sexually trafficked individuals should not be arrested and charged as criminals; convictions are a barrier to restoration. Instead, the focus should be placed on arresting and charging the buyers and traffickers. Arresting the prostituted and trafficked individuals further reinforces their exploitation while allowing the men who purchase sex to get away perpetuates the cycle of abuse.

While I was being trafficked, I was arrested five times at a state level. Not once did I ever witness a buyer of sex being arrested, let alone charged. However, on each occasion, I was arrested, and charges were brought against me. I can remember the arresting officer telling the driver of one car “get out of here” as he proceeded to place handcuffs on me. I remember my first arrest. A strip club I was exploited at was raided, and all the patrons were asked to leave while the girls were lined up, questioned, and arrested. Not one buyer was arrested. In fact, the undercover operation was set up to arrest the women who propositioned patrons for sex and not the men who solicited sex.

- **Learn from existing models that are effective in other countries.** We need to take a closer look at the Nordic Model which criminalizes the act of buying sex and decriminalizes the act of selling sex. A 2015 report, “Trafficking of Human Beings,”³ stated that the Nordic Model has been effective in combating trafficking and prostitution. According to the European Union’s harmonized data on human trafficking, Sweden and Norway, for instance, have much lower sex trafficking and prostitution rates than the Netherlands.
- **Recognize that the psychological trauma endured by prostituted individuals and sex trafficking survivors has lasting impacts.** The psychological trauma does not disappear once one exits the life. It lingers and may take years to address even with trauma-informed counseling and mental health treatment. Like many survivors of trafficking, I too had a quota imposed on me by my trafficker and there were severe consequences if my quota was not met. The “consequences” resulted in both physical and psychological abuse. Oftentimes, he would kick me with his Timberland boots, choke me to the point of unconsciousness, and dehumanize me through his verbal abuse which had a lasting psychological impact. While the physical pain went away in days, it took years to address the psychological abuse that left me to unpack the trauma of not feeling worthy, accepted, or even like a human being. While being trafficked, my trafficker never allowed us to color our hair or to wear our hair curly. He stated that those things are not attractive to buyers. After exiting the life, it took me years to wear my hair curly as I continued to believe the lie that I had to wear my hair straight to be attractive. Recently, I colored my hair for the first time in my life and I am still struggling with the color. Each time I look in the mirror I’m reminded of the words of my trafficker. Some would say dye your hair black so you won’t be reminded, but I will not. I will not allow his words to hold me in bondage 12 years later. I will continue to color my hair as I embrace my truth that I am still beautiful and attractive with my hair colored.
- **A comprehensive model must be implemented.** The issue of demand cannot be fought single-handedly. Parents and schools should teach about the harms of prostitution and sex trafficking. In addition, employers

³ Trafficking in Human Beings (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2015), p. 14.

should implement and enforce strict policies prohibiting the purchase of commercial sex acts.

- **Make a conscious effort in all your work to recognize that survivors of prostitution and sex trafficking are human beings.** We are not just research projects, a source of income, or a way to make you feel better about yourselves. Just like you and everyone else, our wellbeing, health, and existence are valuable and matter. Despite our past, we too deserve to be treated with dignity and respect.

I am Shamere McKenzie and I am a human being.

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Shamere McKenzie is the Chief Executive Officer of the Sun Gate Foundation, an anti-trafficking organization that provides educational opportunities for survivors of human trafficking. In addition, she is the anti-trafficking program director for the Salvation Army of Central Maryland where she designed an emergency program to meet the needs of adult survivors of human trafficking, survivors with children, transgendered, and foreign national survivors. Shamere works tirelessly to raise awareness of human trafficking both nationally and internationally by speaking at various universities, conferences, community events and with government officials. She has used her personal experience as a survivor of sex trafficking to train various professionals, including law enforcement, on how to identify and respond to victims of human trafficking, inform policy initiatives, and provide support to various organizations. Additionally, she serves on the speaker's bureau for the Frederick Douglass Family Initiative and Survivors of Slavery organizations. She is also a trainer with Airline Ambassadors where she trains airport personnel how to identify and respond to human trafficking. She is a member of the National Survivor Network and the Survivor Leadership Institute, as well as a mentor to survivors of sex trafficking. Her story has been featured in several books, including a college textbook focused on social justice. In addition, her story has been featured on various television and radio programs, in magazines and newspapers, and on several blogs. She holds an Associate Degree in Liberal Arts from St. Johns University and a Bachelor of Science degree from Loyola University Chicago in Criminology and Criminal Justice.

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